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The Roots of Liberty?: An MHS Mystery

Anne Bentley 00:00

[Upbeat music fades in] Today we have three very short, what look like twigs. This came down to us as roots of the Liberty Tree. We've never had them tested. They're so small and I don't know what we'd find out of them. But it might be interesting to do that one of these years. We would have to have dendrology because that's where it all begins. Are these truly an elm? I don't think roots have the same rings that trunks do so how would you test to see exactly how old these roots are? Like so many of our questions, you may never be able to answer it but sure have fun trying.
[Music fades out]

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:52

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:01

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:03

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS). Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Cassie Cloutier 01:29

As you heard, Anne Bentley, the MHS Curator of Art & Artifacts, explain in the introduction, we are looking at a bundle of tree roots that the MHS acquired in 1860. The fragments were given to the MHS under the assumption that they were from Boston's Liberty Tree, a mature American elm tree that served as a rallying point and symbol of unity for rebels in the years leading up to the

American Revolution. The origin of these roots, however, was never confirmed. Are they actually from the Liberty Tree? Are they even from an American elm? On this episode, we set out to solve this mystery.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:12

We first hear from Professor Jacqueline Reynoso, a historian of early America about the meaning of liberty trees, and the related liberty poles. Afterward, we sat down with Anne Bentley to examine these relics. Lastly, we visited the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University. Professor William Friedman, the Director of the Arboretum, and the Arnold professor of organismic, and evolutionary biology at Harvard, discusses the biology of elm trees, and helps shed light on our mysterious bundle of roots. [Music fades out]

Cassie Cloutier 02:48

To understand the origin and cultural context of these roots, we spoke with Professor Jacqueline Reynoso, an Assistant Professor of History at CSU Channel Islands. Professor Reynoso researches the processes of geopolitical imagining in 18th century North America. We first asked Professor Reynoso to explain exactly what a liberty tree is.

Jacqueline Reynoso 03:12

So, at a basic level, a liberty tree was a tree that was ideologically and politically charged in meaning. It came to stand as a symbol for patriot ideas about liberty, about what liberty meant about the kinds of activities that reinforce liberty, and then perhaps more importantly about the kinds of actions that should be taken to safeguard liberty. And so, liberty trees existed throughout North America in different numbers, most of them are located in the New England region.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:50

And do we know the earliest instance of the designation of a liberty tree in the colonies.

Jacqueline Reynoso 03:57

So the first liberty tree was the one in Boston, and that one was in August of 1765. That is the first liberty tree that we see. And so, you could argue that the liberty trees we see coming up in other places are being designated in other places that those are sort of modeled off of what took place in Boston that led to the first Liberty Tree.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:21

We then asked Professor Reynoso why this tree was so significant and how revolutionaries would recognize its location.

Jacqueline Reynoso 04:29

Boston used to be on a peninsula and as you mentioned, there was a neck there was a thin strip of land that connected Boston to the mainland and the main roadway to go into Boston. Once you cross over that strip of land to go into the center of Boston, you'd be walking through this main road, and towards the end of that neck, there was a grove of elm trees and one of those elm trees becomes the site of a particular protest and then gets designated the Tree of Liberty and the set of trees themselves are known as the Great Elms, which speaks to kind of not yet the status of one of those trees as a monument, but them being kind of close to landmarks that you could refer to knowing that others would know what grove of trees you're referring to.

Jacqueline Reynoso 05:15

But in this case, there was something about this specific site of the initial protests that was kind of encapsulated in the larger symbolism of the meaning of the protests that it became so tied to the site that in fact, the area around it becomes sort of referred to as Liberty Hall. But I think there was such a connection between the specific tree and the specific site about where this protest took place that was difficult to divorce.

Cassie Cloutier 05:42

And what is the difference between liberty trees and liberty poles?

Jacqueline Reynoso 05:47

I would argue that the overarching symbol of a liberty pole was pretty similar to liberty trees, but there were some important differences. So overall, a liberty pole was kind of playing into the larger meaning of what liberty meant relative to kind of patriot rhetoric and activity, how it could be safeguarded, what kinds of activities could be associated with it. But there were a few differences. So, liberty poles were masked. They did come from trees, but they are stripped down. They were pretty much mass or like very tall. You could argue flag poles or things like that, that were planted or raised onto sites. But because they weren't rooted, which I'd argue is one of the big differences is one of them's rooted, one of them's not rooted because of that there was a flexibility in terms of the location that they could be raised. And that mattered. For example, the first liberty pole in New York City was one that was placed in what was called The Fields of New York City, which you could think of as the Common and it was located close to barracks where some of the British troops were stationed at the time. So, New York City prior to the war in the 1760s. This was the headquarters of the British troops in North America and so some of the barracks where some of the soldiers were located, were right near the New York City Common so the liberty pole there was placed in this site for a very specific meaning. It did play into the larger process of bringing meaning to the revolutionary cause. It was raised when news of the Stamp Acts repeal had reached New York City, so it is connected to that. But it was also meant to serve as kind of a communication device. It was placed so that it was in the face of British soldiers. So, there's flexibility in terms of the location.

Jacqueline Reynoso 07:47

So, liberty trees and liberty poles were noteworthy, not just for patriots, as sites that patriots could kind of congregate around or certain kinds of activities took place to kind of foment and reinforce revolutionary activity. They were also noteworthy for loyalists and British troops, but in their case, they were sites of concern, and so often, also targeted sites. So, for British troops, especially as the war begins, when British troops occupy certain places, if there's a liberty tree, or liberty pole, they're often an early sight of target, so they get cut down. And liberty trees aren't replaceable in the ways that liberty poles are. And so, for example, the New York pole gets replaced a few times. When they

are replaced, there are sometimes measures that get taken to make them a little bit more durable. So like iron plates get added and sometimes there's people that get stationed to guard them and things like that, but they can get cut down and because of that they're replaceable. And then the last thing I would say, is that you can make an argument and scholars have made an argument that liberty poles also sometimes reveal a lot about the intention that goes into creating them in ways that liberty trees can't necessarily communicate to the same extent. And by that, I mean, that liberty poles, they're different heights. From the archive, you'll find some that will be about like 45 feet high. But then there's also records of liberty poles, getting as high as 100 feet high. They're sizable things, objects that require a lot of work to actually raise them in the first place. And so, scholars like Alfred Young, I believe was the first to really make this argument have argued that even just the creation of liberty poles tells you that there was a lot of buy in by a significant number of people to raise it in the first place. With liberty trees, that's not necessarily a guarantee because they are trees that exist that then get designated and that doesn't necessarily reveal that much of the scale of support that goes into designating them. Of course, we can try to get at that by some of the newspaper accounts of what happens at these liberty trees and the kinds of crowds that get reported. So, we know for example, when we're talking about Boston's that there is a lot of buy in from the very beginning. But that's not always guaranteed in the way that liberty poles will be even if we don't have as much newspaper reporting or correspondence accounts of certain liberty poles.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:38

Do we know how long after the phenomenon of liberty trees started, do we start seeing liberty poles?

Jacqueline Reynoso 10:45

So, the first liberty tree was designated in 1765. And the first liberty pole was designated or was raised in 1766. So, it's not too much of a gap after that. And then in the years, following that, in the 1760s to 1770s, we do see more liberty trees than poles designated. It's hard to get a complete accounting of them because scholars depend on the archive for recording their presence to get at those numbers. So, we have an incomplete accounting of them. But in the years following 1765, we

do get a total of 13 liberty trees and 55 liberty poles that scholars have been able to track down. So, it does seem that there's a lot more liberty poles that pop up in that decade, than the following decades since their first emergence then we do see liberty trees. And I think a big part of that is kind of the flexibility and replaceability of them.

Cassie Cloutier 11:55

Professor Reynoso explained the importance of the tree and its fragments after loyalists cut the tree down in 1775.

Jacqueline Reynoso 12:04

In Boston, in the wake of Lexington and Concord after the war begins when there's an occupying British force. Soon after the war began, they cut down the tree. The site itself still becomes a place that people seek out and bring meaning to and in fact, this carries on for several decades so that even when the Marquis de Lafayette when he returns to do a tour, I think this was close to like the 50th year anniversary of American Independence, he comes to North America and he does a tour and when he is in Boston, he goes to the site of the original Liberty Tree because the site itself is viewed as connected to the larger meaning of what the tree stood for, and the kind of activity that reinforced but also safeguarded certain ideas about liberty and what it meant to the patriot cause.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:49

So, walk us through the brief life of this Liberty Tree. It gets designated in 1765. What are the circumstances of that and then it is chopped down in '75? So, it's around for 10 years?

Jacqueline Reynoso 13:06

Yes, yeah. So in 1765, the events that first colored the meaning of this tree revolve around a protest against the Stamp Act. In middle of August of 1765, patriots that are part of the Loyal Nine end up protesting the Stamp Act by targeting individuals they associate with the act. One of those is Andrew Oliver, who lived in Boston, and he was designated a stamp distributor. So, he would be distributing the tax stamped paper or the stamps that would be affixed to paper based activity that

was now going to be taxed because of the Stamp Act. He is represented that day through a straw figure effigy that's hung on one of the great elm trees at the bottom of the neck going into Boston from mainland Massachusetts. And then in addition to that, there's a boot there's a large boot that is also hung off the branches of the elm tree. And that boot stands as a symbol of Lord Bute B-U-T-E. The soul of that boot is painted green. So, it's a green soul, which is then meant to symbolize Greenville. It's a Greenville, so it's meant to symbolize George Grenville. He and the Earl of Bute are viewed as the architects of the Stamp Act. Inside the boot is also placed the effigy of the devil, which is communicating the patriots' view of the kind of influence that leads to this kind of legislation that they're now dealing with, where they feel that they're not represented in the passing of that legislation. And so on August 14th of 1765, colonists who are navigating this well trafficked road are in a well trafficked area of Boston come across this scene and then also word of the of the scene circulate and so more people come and congregate around the tree. And so that's that initial protest. After that this tree becomes a common site for different kinds of activities. So, Andrew Oliver, who had been targeted during that initial protest; he ends up actually resigning as his commission as a stamp distributor that happens a few months later at the end of the year, and he does that publicly, and he does it publicly at the site of the Liberty Tree. The Liberty Tree also becomes a site where news gets celebrated. So, when the repeal of the Stamp Acts actually arrives in North America, that becomes a site where some commemorations and toasts get consumed. It becomes a site where speeches get made. It becomes a site where individuals become pressured into agreeing to certain agreements like the non-importation on consumption agreements. It also becomes a site that gets commemorated through anniversary celebrations from time to time. But it also eventually becomes a contested site between different ideas about what the revolutionary cause should symbolize, and who should take part in that, and what kinds of activities should be associated with it. So sometimes, because the Liberty Tree site might be the site in which you can argue, more extreme versions of colonial grassroots protests take place. There are individuals, people who themselves would call themselves the Sons of Liberty, who want to distance themselves from kind of more extreme versions of protests. They then also through rhetoric through print culture, but also through actual activities that they frame around the Liberty Tree that might start at the side of Liberty Tree, but then continue on and other sites elsewhere. There's also an attempt by

different sectors of Boston's population, to try to redefine what that site means and who's part of bringing meaning to it and what kinds of activities should be associated with it. There's not a uniform understanding of what that site means. It becomes a site of contestation. But what remains during that decade of its existence is that that tree has a strong association to the initial start of revolutionary protests because of its place in the Stamp Act protests and how that's so deeply connected to its emergence. So even when it's cut down, there's a kind of general understanding that what's been attacked is a shared symbol of revolutionary protest. It's such an important site that tokens are tempted to be saved and held onto because of the meaning that the Liberty Tree itself carries. And so, I know I've made a big deal about the site itself. And that continues to be an important site. The way that it was cut down, the fact that it was cut down actually brings meaning to the site. But it's also liberty trees themselves are these material objects that are connected to a larger symbol that becomes defined through activity and rhetoric as well. So, the symbol itself is larger than the material object that inspired it, in some ways. The remnants of cut down trees and sometimes become sought out as tokens. So, twigs or pieces of them can be sought out as tokens. I personally don't know enough about what happens to most of the Liberty Tree in Boston once it's cut down. But I do know that some of the pieces of it are held on to by patriots in the area that have associated with great meaning. Even at the time, they were sites that were also receptacles of other understandings of what the Revolution stood for. In fact, they were sites of contestation, as we talked about where different perspectives of what they should stand for in different kinds of activities that they should shelter took place. So it's fitting that they're objects that can then be viewed and looked upon and speculated upon and also contain all the different perspectives that people who look upon them might think, and their different understandings of the legacy of the American Revolution for them and the ways in which that legacy has played out and their thoughts about that. So, it just feels very fitting.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:13

We sat down with Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art & Artifacts at the MHS, to look at these relics. Anne began by describing the roots themselves.

Anne Bentley 19:23

Today we have three very short what look like twigs. The longest one is about two and a half inches. The two smaller ones are about an inch each and they are tied together literally by red tape. Well, this little bundle is barely a half an inch in diameter. It's quite small. If these are indeed the roots of the Liberty Tree, they're at the very tail end of the roots.

Cassie Cloutier 19:53

How did these fragments come to the MHS?

Anne Bentley 19:57

They were given to us on May 1st, 1860, by Derastus Clapp, an interesting character. He was New Hampshire born in 1792. He moved to Boston in 1818, after his marriage and when he first got here, he established an auction house and a bit later and in 1828, Mayor Josiah Quincy appointed him constable for the city of Boston. Then in 1848, Derastus Clapp was promoted to become the first detective in Boston. In fact, the first detective in the United States as Boston was the first city to establish a city detective department. And according to Clapp, for the first 20 years he was the only detective in the city of Boston. In 1854, Boston established its first uniformed police force, so they were no longer constable force, but a police force and Constable Clapp was sort of demoted and wound up ticketing illegally parked traffic on State Street, and serving orders of notice issued by the city clerk that he hung on and finally retired in 1874, at which point he was interviewed in The Boston Traveler of October 26th, 1874. And this is how we know a bit more about Derastus Clapp than we probably would otherwise. A lot of things came to us from interested citizens because for a long time, we were the only game in town and anything of an interesting or historical nature found its way into our collections. People felt we needed to have them, and we were happy to take them. So, Derastus Clapp at some point in his career came into possession of these twigs, these Liberty Tree roots, and David Sears, who was a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society had built an office building on the side of the Liberty Tree and had the gifts of the Liberty Tree inserted on the third floor of that particular building on the site where the Liberty Tree once stood. The tree itself was an American elm and was set to date from 1645 or 1646. And it was felled in August 1775

by loyalists, led by Nathaniel Coffin Jr. David Sears is the one that prominently made reference in an artistic form to the tree that once stood on the side of his building. That was in 1850. Since Clapp was constable in the town at the time and knew everyone, it's entirely possible that at that point during excavation for the cellar, or the basement of this building, they came upon more roots of trees and just assumed that was the Liberty Tree, of course. So, it has come down to us as roots of the Liberty Tree.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:50

I always thought that regular soldiers tore down the tree, but you're saying that loyalists were responsible for its destruction?

Anne Bentley 22:58

Yes. You know, in concert with British troops that were in the town at the time during the Siege of Boston. During that winter, they cut down anything and everything. But of course, the primary target would have been the Liberty Tree because of what it meant to the patriots and loyalists, and the king's soldiers would have chopped that one down first. The tree was cut down and used for firewood, which doesn't necessarily mean that the roots would have been dug up, it would have been a massive undertaking to dig up roots at that time. It's always been my impression that as Boston was built around that area, as we moved out farther from the center of Boston, then of course, you're digging up all kinds of botanical matter, vegetative matter, and obviously stumps and tree roots along the way. So, Bostonians knew, of course, from lore and tales and family histories of where the tree stood. So, digging around in that area, when they came across roots, that's when they would have identified them at whatever time they first dug up that area.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:03

Can we confirm that the roots are of an elm tree?

Anne Bentley 24:09

We've never had them tested. They're so small. I don't know what we'd find out of them. But it might be interesting to do that one of these years, not by visual examination, you'd need to have dendrology done to sort out that. But that's the neat thing about these. You can follow all of these clues and hypotheses and see how close you can get to actually pinning this down. We would have to have dendrology because that's where it all begins. Are these truly an elm? I don't think roots have the same rings that trunks do so how would you test to see exactly how old these roots are? Like so many of our questions you may never be able to answer it but sure have fun trying.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:56

Now you say that the roots are wrapped up in red tape. Did we put this on?

Anne Bentley 25:04

No, this is how it came to us, and it came to us from Derastus Clapp whose business was legal documents, and these legal documents are tied up in red tape. That's how we got the term. This is legal red tape, at least from the 1860s. When he gave these little twigs to us. When I say red tape, some people today may think of sticky tape but no, this is cotton twill tape that's dyed red, and has since faded into a pinkish red. It's wonderful what a 19th century Bostonians cherished. They were closer to their history than we are now. It was still living history for them. After all, Clapp himself was born in 1792. That's a year after we were founded, and some of the founding members of the society lived through the Revolution, and we're quite active in it. So, he was much closer to it than we are. They're wrapped so carefully in red tape clearly meant something to him, and that he wanted us to have them as a memory of the tree that once stood and so we have kept them.

Cassie Cloutier 26:13

We then took a trip to the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University to speak with Professor William Friedman, the Director of the Arboretum. Professor Friedman began by showing us an American elm.

Anne Bentley 26:35

I don't think I've ever been on a golf cart before.

William Friedman 26:42

The Arboretum is laid out like any museum with galleries. And that means taxonomically we're going in this conifer gallery to our left. We're gonna go to the elm gallery, as I call it. So, these are elms right here. We'll stop, pull over. So, this is an American elm. We have some here, and because they're not densely populated, they can do okay. We keep an eye on them. But they're beautiful, beautiful trees.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:14

And so, this is an American elm and what distinguishes an American elm from other elms?

William Friedman 27:19

Well evolutionary history and, you know, there would be some characteristics that in terms of the leaf shapes and internal structure and physiology. I think there's probably 30 or more species of elm worldwide. And they have some similarities and some differences. And as you get to be more and more familiar with the different species, even the bark might look a little different.

Anne Bentley 27:45

It has such wonderfully crusty bark.

William Friedman 27:46

Yeah, it's beautiful, absolutely. Nice lichens on them. I mean you're looking at a tree we put in, that we hope will be here for several 100 years. As was the case with all of our trees, right?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:58

After taking a look at a young American elm, we proceeded deeper into the Arboretum to search for more mature plants that would have approximated the size of the Liberty Tree.

William Friedman 28:07

So, you can see these elms are all in front of us here. Again, many different species from around the world. Here you got a European White elm planted as it came as a seed in 1888 to the Arboretum . Look at that that's been growing here for 115 years.

Anne Bentley 28:28

Liberty Tree was 119 years when they were using it.

William Friedman 28:32

So, it gives you some approximation. That's the great thing about the Arnold is that you really can come here and imagine something in the past in terms of size. You can then walk over a tree that's seven years old. But then you can make the connection of eons of time because trees in a way you can measure them in lifetimes of humans, right? There's several generations that have taken care of this tree.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:57

Well, how tall would you estimate this?

William Friedman 29:01

Gosh, I don't know. It could be 60 feet tall, maybe more. It's a good-sized tree. But again, from a distance, you would have seen it back in the 1770s.

Anne Bentley 29:12

Certainly, taller than any house around it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:14

Do you have like one of each species?

William Friedman 29:17

More than one. Absolutely. We have probably a dozen American elms here. And so, this is the heart of the elm collection of the flank. And generally, we want to have more than one because we want to get different parts of the range, which means local evolution, genetics, again, for scientific collection for studying climate change, for example, we would want to know where that elm came from. Where, you know, where its genetics had evolved.

Cassie Cloutier 29:46

Prior to this visit, we sent images of the roots to Professor Friedman, hoping that he could determine the species and origin of these fragments. He told us what he found.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:58

So, let's go through the process. We emailed you. You looked at the pictures and?

William Friedman 30:02

I thought that's not an elm. It just can't be an elm because what you sent me was a very nice photograph of the cut surface of the wood. And I'm not a wood anatomist, meaning a specialist in wood. But elm wood is pretty distinctive, and it's what's called ring porous. And what does that mean? Well, that means that every year when a new increment of wood is laid down by the tree that increases the girth of the tree, there's a pattern to it. Different trees have different patterns. So, what you're really laying down is plumbing, right? So, what does wood do? It moves water from the roots to the canopy. All right, but you can imagine there are many different ways to put pipes down. And in ring porous trees, such as the American elm at the very beginning of a growth ring, you get these huge pipes, you can see them with your naked eye. And you notice that there were these pores on the cut surface. In an American elm, what I associate with wood is there's one single layer of big pipes, and then the rest of the growth ring has no big pipes. So, there's a ring of pores, and then there's no pores. And now some trees are what are called diffuse porous. And that means you have pipes that are being laid down kind of regularly throughout the growing season. So, if you were to look, you would see pipe pipe, pipe pipe, and then the end of the growing season in your tree ring. But in the American elm, it's one single layer of pipes. They're really prominent. They're very wide

diameter, very efficient at conducting water, and then no pipes for the rest of the year. So, what did your picture show me? It showed me something that looked diffuse porous, meaning pipes, pipes, pipes, pipe, I couldn't even see growth rings, I was like, 'What the heck! That can't be in American elm.' So, here's the tricky part. There is an immense amount of knowledge about wood anatomy, but the only wood people study is the wood of the chute system above ground. So, when you say what does the wood of a root look like on an American elm? The answer is I have no idea. And no one else does. Because no one's actually bothered to look until you say, 'Well, shouldn't it look just like the wood of the shoot?' The answer is, I don't know. But son of a gun, someone in Germany, probably 30, 40 years ago, I can't remember, who was interested in what root anatomy of wood in elms looked like. And they took a root at the base of the trunk, and they did a cross section. And that cross sections showed it was ring porous, just like the shoot. Okay, so that's not at all what we saw in your picture that you sent me. Then this person said, 'I'm gonna go out a couple of meters and do another cross section.' And all of a sudden, it doesn't look ring porous, doesn't look diffuse porous. It's what we might call semi ring porous, which is you know, the in between stuff, so it's bigger pipes, then smaller and smaller and smaller bits gradual tapering off, and then this person went out seven meters. So, let's walk seven meters. And there would be roots under us from this tree, of course, and the Liberty Tree would have had roots extending out. So the trunks gone. The British have taken that off their hands, but they didn't take again is the thing no one looks for underground parts, the roots. And this German anatomist took a look at a root. And lo and behold, it's not semi ring porous at this distance. It's basically diffuse pores. And I looked at the picture and it looked identical to what you sent me. I can't be sure. I'm going to dig up an American elm root this summer and do some work on the microscopes and I'll know for sure, but likely what you have is not only an elm because the pipes are the right size. They're these water conducting cells. But what you have is probably something is some distance like us standing relative to that trunk, someone was pulling and finding the roots and excavating them. And then they took that root and put it into a bundle. And we're probably looking at the root of an American elm which has the pipes not looking at all in terms of distribution, like the chute system, but at least from what I can tell you amazing thing is someone ever bothered to look at any elm roots and there it was sitting in three photographs.

Anne Bentley 34:02

It's wonderful.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:04

Okay, so we can say that it's likely from an American elm. We'll never know if it's actually the Liberty Tree itself. That's unknowable. But yes, this is good news.

William Friedman 34:14

Yeah, it is good news. And it's likely to be from that tree. Because if you think about it...

Anne Bentley 34:20

It was the only tree there. I mean, it was built around.

William Friedman 34:23

Yeah. But what you showed me is likely to be an American elm. It's unlikely, you know, here at the Arnold Arboretum, we have a million different elm species. Not really, but quite a few, but in downtown Boston, likely an American elm, right? That would have been a classic planted tree or one that was there and they find the spot, the digging and all of a sudden these wood cables that haven't rotted, right, come out.

Anne Bentley 34:46

Yes. Because you know, when you think of the position of the Liberty Tree, unlike the Common where we've had vegetation forever, we had built up around that area and that tree stood alone amongst the buildings so that any roots that are found in 1850s, more than likely from that tree since it was this massive the root system would have gone out quite a bit.

William Friedman 35:10

Wow! That's a great, that's a great. So, I had completely assumed that at the moment the Americans, the rebels wanted to memorialize, and there was a sort of ceremonial aspect to it. But in fact, it's quite the opposite. It's, you had to wait another almost century.

Anne Bentley 35:27

Yes, yes.

William Friedman 35:29

But they all make sense. That's, that's all I can tell you. But I would never have guessed that the roots would have wood anatomy so different than the shoots. But it's a bias right? Until you look you can't know. And this summer, I'm going to have our horticulturalist excavate an American elm root. I have a student in the lab, an undergraduate who's working on some wood and the evolution of wood structure. And then we will actually have the sort of I think the final resolution. Does a root from an American elm that we know is an American elm at about six or seven meters from the trunk look like what you have in your bundle?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 36:07

And decay would not cause any changes in how it looks over the course of 150 years?

William Friedman 36:13

No, in fact, what's so wonderful to hear about is that that root sat in the ground for 100 years and didn't rot. The wood you showed me that picture of is in great shape.

Cassie Cloutier 36:25

We returned from the Arboretum with the satisfaction of knowing that the roots that had been in our collections for 160 years were actually from an American elm and likely to have been from the Liberty Tree. One of the most important symbols of the revolutionary cause. Our inquiry into the roots also shows that even though researchers come to the MHS for answers about the past, there are still plenty of mysteries that lurk in our stacks, as well.

Cassie Cloutier 36:54

[Outro music begins] To look at the objects discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 37:16

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Cassie Cloutier 37:48

Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.